

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

April 7, 2003

CONTACT: Lauren G. Dreilinger

EEOC Trial Attorney

(312) 353-7303

TTY: (312) 353-2421

Noelle Brennan

Supervisory Trial

(312) 353-7582

John Hendrickson

EEOC Regional Attorney

(312) 353-8551

Attorney

## **EEOC SUES CHICAGO AREA HOSPITAL FOR POST-9/11 BACKLASH DISCRIMINATION**

*Suit Says Supervisor of Muslim Worker Referred to Ramadan as 'Taliban'*

CHICAGO - The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) today filed its fourth post-9/11 backlash discrimination lawsuit against Norwegian American Hospital (Norwegian) for subjecting Charging Party Rashidah Abdullah to harassment, discriminatory discipline, retaliation, and termination because of her religion, Islam. According to the suit, filed under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in Federal District Court in Chicago, the religious discrimination and harassment began prior to September 11, 2001, but continued and intensified thereafter. Norwegian American Hospital is located on North Francisco Avenue in Chicago's Humboldt Park neighborhood and has more than 500 employees.

"Our nation's tradition of religious tolerance and our laws prohibiting discrimination and ensuring equal employment opportunity must be honored," said EEOC Chair Cari M. Dominguez. "Employers must remain vigilant in guarding against backlash discrimination directed at innocent individuals due to their religion, ethnicity, or country of origin - especially after the tragic events of September 11 and during this time of war."

EEOC's court-filed Complaint alleges that one of the hospital's managers created a religiously hostile work environment by treating Abdullah worse than other workers because of her religion and finally fired her, and that Norwegian endorsed the mistreatment. The EEOC said that its administrative investigation,

which it conducted prior to filing suit, indicated that Abdullah's manager made offensive comments about her religion and religious beliefs, including referring to the Muslim holy observance of Ramadan as "Taliban." The EEOC also contends that Norwegian retaliated against Abdullah for complaining about the religious harassment and discriminatory treatment by intensifying the derogatory comments and unjustified disciplinary measures after the events of September 11, 2001.

John Hendrickson, EEOC's Regional Attorney in Chicago, said: "An employer that engages in unlawful discrimination suffers a self-inflicted wound. When that discrimination is followed by retaliation, as it was in this case, the employer compounds the injury. EEOC's vigilance in preventing and remedying religious discrimination in the workplace - whether the religion involved is Christianity, Judaism, Islam or any other- has not and will not falter."

John Rowe, Director of the EEOC's Chicago District Office, add: "As the President and the federal government have repeatedly made clear since 9/11, any on-the-job backlash against our Muslim neighbors is unacceptable and will not be tolerated."

The lawsuit, which was filed after the EEOC's efforts to voluntarily conciliate the matter with the hospital proved unavailing, seeks monetary relief in the form of back pay and compensatory and punitive damages, an order requiring the company to implement measures to prevent a recurrence, and a permanent injunction against future discrimination and retaliation. The suit, which was filed in the Eastern Division of the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois and captioned *Equal Employment Opportunity Commission v. Norwegian American Hospital*, has been assigned to District Judge Zagel and designated case number 03 C 2360. The case is the EEOC's fourth lawsuit alleging backlash discrimination against employees related to the events of September 11, 2001.

Lauren Dreilinger, Chicago Trial Attorney who will lead the EEOC litigation, said: "Ms. Abdullah's supervisor made disparaging comments about her religion, including linking her faith to the Taliban, the former regime in Afghanistan, and stated that if she was unhappy with her treatment that she should leave the country. Such jibes and put downs have no place at work under any circumstances. Moreover, the harassment was especially egregious here because Abdullah's family has lived in the United States for generations."

In addition to enforcing Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin, the EEOC enforces Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in the private sector and state and local governments; the Age Discrimination in Employment Act, which protects individuals who are 40 years of age or older; the Equal Pay Act; the Rehabilitation Act of 1973's prohibitions against discrimination affecting individuals with disabilities in the federal sector; and sections of the Civil Rights

Act of 1991. Further information about the Commission is available on the agency's web site at [www.eeoc.gov](http://www.eeoc.gov).

---

*This page was last modified on April 7, 2003.*



[Return to Home Page](#)